LIBERALISM DOESN'T EXIST

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I find Stephen Carter's argument compelling and incisive, and my only quarrel is with its conclusion when he urges a "softened liberal politics" that would "acknowledge and genuinely cherish the religious beliefs that for many Americans provide their fundamental worldview."[1] He confesses that he has "not yet worked out the details"[2] of such a politics, and it is my contention that he never could for reasons he himself enumerates. The chief reason is that liberalism is informed by a faith (a word deliberately chosen) in reason as a faculty that operates independently of any particular world view. It is therefore committed at once to allowing competing world views equal access to its deliberative arena, and to disallowing the claims of any one of them to be supreme, unless of course it is demonstrated to be at all points compatible with the principles of reason. It follows then that liberalism can only "cherish" religion as something under its protection; to take it seriously would be to regard it as it demands to be regarded, as a claimant to the adjudicative authority already deeded in liberal thought to reason. This liberalism cannot do because, as Carter points out, if you take away the "primacy of reason"[3] liberal thought loses its integrity, has nothing at its center, becomes just one more competing ideology rather than a procedure (and it is in procedure or process that liberalism puts its faith) that outflanks or transcends ideology. The one thing liberalism cannot do is put reason *inside* the battle where it would have to contend with other adjudicative principles and where it could not succeed merely by invoking itself because its own status would be what was at issue.

Indeed, liberalism depends on not inquiring into the status of reason, depends, that is, on the assumption that reason's status is obvious: it is that which enables us to assess the claims of competing perspectives and beliefs. Once this assumption is in place, it produces an opposition between reason and belief, and that opposition is already a hierarchy in which every belief is required to pass muster at the bar of reason. But what if reason or rationality itself rests on belief? Then it would be the

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1. Carter, *Evolutionism, Creationism, and Treating Religion as a Hobby*, 1987 DUKE L.J. 977, 995.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.* at 985.

case that the opposition between reason and belief was a false one, and that every situation of contest should be recharacterized as a quarrel between two sets of belief with no possibility of recourse to a mode of deliberation that was not itself an extension of belief. This is in fact my view of the matter and I would defend it by asking a question that the ideology of reason must repress: where do reasons come from? The liberal answer must be that reasons come from nowhere, that they reflect the structure of the universe or at least of the human brain; but in fact reasons always come from somewhere, and the somewhere they come from is precisely the realm to which they are (rhetorically) opposed, the realm of particular (angled, partisan, biased) assumptions and agendas. What this means is that not all reasons (or reasonable trains of thought) are reasons for everyone. If (to take a humble literary example) I am given as a reason for preferring one interpretation of a poem to another the fact that it accords with the poet's theological views, I will only hear it as a reason (as a piece of weighty evidence) if it is *already* my conviction that a poet's aesthetic performance could be influenced by his theology; if, on the other hand, I see poetry and theology as independent and even antagonistic forms of life (as did many of those new critics for whom the autonomy of the aesthetic was an article of faith) this fact will not be a reason at all, but something obviously beside the (literary) point. Similarly, a lawyer may give as a reason for acquitting his client the fact that his action was not intentional, but both the fact and the reason it becomes will be perspicuous only because the boundaries between the intentional and the unintentional have been drawn in ways that could themselves be contested, even if at the moment they are not being contested but assumed. It is not that reasons can never be given or that they are, when given, incapable of settling disputes, but that the force they exert and their status *as* reasons depends on the already-in-place institution of distinctions that themselves rest on a basis no firmer (no less subject to dispute) than the particulars they presently order. In short, what is and is not a reason will always be a matter of faith, that is, of the assumptions that are bedrock within a discursive system which because it rests upon them cannot (without self-destructing) call them into question. (Nor can one avoid this conclusion by invoking supposedly abstract—i.e. contentless—logical operations like the "law of contradiction"; for just what is and is not a contradiction will vary depending on the distinctions already in place; a contradiction must be a contradiction between something and something else and the shape of those somethings will always be the product of an interpretive rather than a formal determination.)

It follows then that persons embedded within *different* discursive systems will not be able to hear the other's reasons *as* reasons, but only as errors or even delusions. This, I think, is Carter's point when he observes that "to the devout fundamentalist . . . evolutionary theory is not simply contrary to religious teachings; . . . it is *demonstrably* false."[4] I take the stress on the word *demonstrably* to mean that Carter understands fully that the clash between liberals and fundamentalists is a clash between two faiths, or if you prefer (and it is my thesis that these two formulations are interchangeable) between two ways of thinking undergirded by incompatible first principles, empirical verification and biblical inerrancy. Given this incompatibility it would not be possible for either party to "cherish" or "take" seriously the commitments and conclusions of the other, for to do so would be to abandon the foundation on which it rests. The fundamentalist cannot measure the statements in *Genesis* against a standard of scientific fact because for him the proper direction of measurement is the other way around; he knows (in the only sense that knowledge can possibly have) that whatever does not accord with the Word of God cannot be true; and he knows further that untruths are dangerous and should not be allowed to flourish. And in the eyes of the liberal, the pronouncements of fundamentalists are no less dangerous and for the same reason: they flow from ignorance and bigotry, and if they go unchecked they may succeed in turning the nation away from reason. Accordingly the liberal feels obliged to quarantine religious pronouncements, to confine them to contexts (the home, the Church) that present the least risk of general infection. He cannot allow them to enter into the general political conversation because he does not regard them, and *could* not regard them, as issuing from a respectable point of view on a par with the points of view, for example, of libertarians or utilitarians. And by his lights he is right: the debate between those who would maximize individual freedom and those who would achieve the greatest good for the greatest number is conducted according to principles (of argument and evidence) to which all parties subscribe; not only do fundamentalists not subscribe to these principles, they stigmatize them as the diabolical tools of godless humanism; obviously they cannot be given a place in the arena for they refuse to play by the rules. Of course, a humane society (another key notion in liberal thought) does not kill or imprison people just because they believe foolish and unprofitable things; indeed it is the disinclination to punish those with whom you disagree that distinguishes the liberal from his "fanatic" opposite; those who believe obviously false things must be protected. Nevertheless, this does

4. *Id.* at 992.

not require that the fundamentalist be taken seriously, for according to liberal assumptions, he gave up his claim to serious consideration when he abandoned the rule of reason.

All of this is implicit (and sometimes explicit) in Carter's argument. Why then does he cling to the hope of "softening the tension inherent in the liberal principle of neutrality toward religion"?[5] The answer, I think, is that he mistakes the essence of liberalism when he characterizes it as "steeped . . . in skepticism, rationalism and tolerance."[6] "Tolerance" may be what liberalism claims for itself in contradistinction to other, supposedly more authoritarian, views; but liberalism is tolerant only *within* the space demarcated by the operations of reason; any one who steps outside that space will not be tolerated, will not be regarded as a fully enfranchised participant in the marketplace (of ideas) over which reason presides. In this liberalism does not differ from fundamentalism or from any other system of thought; for any ideology—and an ideology is what liberalism is—must be founded on some basic conception of what the world is like (it is the creation of God; it is a collection of atoms), and while the conception may admit of differences within its boundaries (and thus be, relatively, tolerant) it cannot legitimize differences that would blur its boundaries, for that would be to delegitimize itself. A liberalism that did not "insist on reason as the only legitimate path to knowledge about the world"[7] would not be liberalism; the principle of a rationality that is above the partisan fray (and therefore can assure its "fairness") is not incidental to liberal thought; it *is* liberal thought, and if it is "softened" by denying reason its priority and rendering it just one among many legitimate paths, liberalism would have no content. Of course it is my contention (and Carter's too I think) that liberalism doesn't have the content it believes it has. That is, it does not have at its center an adjudicative mechanism that stands apart from any particular moral and political agenda. Rather it is a very particular moral agenda (privileging the individual over the community, the cognitive over the affective, the abstract over the particular) that has managed, by the very partisan means it claims to transcend, to grab the moral high ground, and to grab it from a discourse—the discourse of religion—that had held it for centuries. This victory certainly sets liberalism apart from the ideologies it has vanquished, but because the victory is political, liberalism cannot finally claim to be different from its competitors. Liberalism, however, defines itself by that difference—by its not being the program of any particular

5. *Id.* at 995.

6. *Id.* at 978.

7. *Id.* at 995.

group or party—and therefore in the absence of that difference one can only conclude, and conclude nonparadoxically, that liberalism doesn't exist.